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RUEHN/AMEMBASSY OSLO PRIORITY 3559
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO PRIORITY 2636
RUEHCG/AMCONSUL CHENNAI PRIORITY 7334
RUEHCI/AMCONSUL KOLKATA PRIORITY 0316
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RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY
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RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS PRIORITY
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 COLOMBO 000135

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/23/2017

TAGS: PGOV PREL PHUM MV

SUBJECT: MALDIVES: A NEED TO STRENGTHEN DEMOCRACY TO
COUNTER-BALANCE POTENTIAL RISING ISLAMIC FUNDAMENTALISM

REF: A. 2006 COLOMBO 1910

1B. 2005 COLOMBO 837

Classified By: AMBASSADOR ROBERT O. BLAKE, JR. FOR REASONS 1.4(b) and (d)

11. (C) SUMMARY: The Ambassador met government officials and the leader of the opposition in Male' on January 16 to discuss the lagging democratic reform process. Ambassador also promoted the Maldives' purchase of Boeing aircraft and a potential joint venture with an American wind power firm. Interlocutors across the political spectrum expressed concern about rising Islamic fundamentalism, noting that a significant delay in the democratization process in this moderate, pro-Western, Islamic country could push some of its citizens toward Islamic extremism. Embassy is developing a strategy with recommendations on ways the USG can assist Maldives in its transition from autocracy to democracy, assuming that little or no new resources are available. End summary.

PACE OF REFORM DRAGS

12. (SBU) During a January 16 visit to Male', the Ambassador met separately with Minister of Energy, Environment, and Water Ahmed Abdullah, Defense Minister Ismail Shafeeu, Information Minister Mohamed Nasheed, members of the Maldives Human Rights Commission, and Abdul Haris, a representative of the national air carrier Island Aviation Services. The Ambassador also met with Attorney General Hassan Saeed and Foreign Minister Ahmed Shaheed, and later with the opposition Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) leader, also named Mohamed Nasheed, and acting MDP president Ibrahim Hussein Zaki. The Ambassador discussed the ongoing democratic reform process, heard concerns about the rise of Islamic fundamentalism, and promoted U.S. economic interests. Poloff discussed similar issues with a range of political and civil society figures in Male' January 14-16.

13. (C) Attorney General Saeed and Foreign Minister Shaheed told Ambassador that factions within the ruling Dhivehi Rayyethunge Party (DRP, or Maldivian People's Party) were

blocking the passage of reform legislation in parliament. They also mentioned two hard-liners, the Chief Justice and Commissioner of Police, as insisting on upholding old, draconian legislation in an effort to hinder the reform process. In Ambassador's meeting with the opposition MDP, party leader Nasheed expressed hope that British High Commissioner Dominic Chilcott would continue to mediate meetings between the government and opposition in Male' to facilitate parliamentary cooperation between reformists on both sides.

PRESS FREEDOM CONCERNS CONTINUE

¶4. (C) The Information Minister had a more positive assessment of the status of reforms, noting that the press has opened up considerably, permitting people to publicly air a range of views, even those opposed to the government. He said he would issue a ministerial decree to recognize private radio stations, which he had been unable to present in early November as planned because it was "the eve of a revolution."

(Note: Nasheed was referring to a planned November 10 opposition rally that never materialized, ref a.) He added that contract law would govern radio operators' conduct, and the contracts would incorporate aspects of press bills currently under debate in parliament. Poloff noted that the international press freedom NGO Article 19 had published several suggestions to improve the bills. Nasheed responded that he had committed to sharing that information with legislators when the bills reached the parliamentary committee.

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¶5. (SBU) Nasheed's optimism notwithstanding, journalists continued to face difficulties. On January 17, immigration officials informed Philip Wellman, an American reporter working for the independent website Minivan News, that he had to leave Maldives within 48 hours. (Wellman had previously been expelled prior to the planned November 10 opposition rally, ref a.). A British journalist for the same website, told us that when he inquired about Wellman's case, Immigration Controller Ibrahim Shafiu said "I do not care whether we are attacking the press and journalism. He is a foreigner and he is not welcome here." Shafiu then warned the British national that he too would be expelled if he "caused trouble."

WORRIES ISLAMIC FUNDAMENTALISM
MAY BE ON THE RISE

¶6. (C) Maldivians from across the political spectrum said they were worried about rising Islamic fundamentalism. Some noted that rifts within the opposition might lead people to reject multi-party politics, and religious extremism could potentially flourish in a resultant power vacuum. Separately, opposition parliamentarian Mariya Didi and independent radio show host Fathimath Shaheeda told poloff that on the island of Himandhoo, all the women are expected to wear the burqa - which has never been the norm in Maldives. Didi said one woman and her daughter left the island to avoid local pressure to wear the full veil. Attorney General Hassan Saeed told the Ambassador that he feared a murder in Himandhoo had been religiously motivated. Saeed said locals attacked and badly injured a visiting non-Muslim Indian teacher, and a witness to the incident died under mysterious circumstances. He blamed the Chief Justice, who as chair of the Supreme Council on Islamic Affairs (SCIA), failed to send moderate preachers to the island or address complaints of rising Islamic orthodoxy. Saeed said he had sent the Chief Justice a letter calling for his resignation, with a copy to President Gayoom.

¶7. (C) In a separate meeting with the Ambassador, the head of the Maldives Human Rights Commission concurred with Saeed,

noting that under the Chief Justice, the SCIA had failed to set standards or provide adequate religious instruction, leading people to seek information elsewhere and to turn to fundamentalist Wahabis trained at madrassas in Saudi Arabia or Pakistan. Independently, Defense Minister Ismail Shafeeu also expressed worry about increasing Wahab'ism, assessing it as a major threat to Maldives. Information Minister Mohamed Nasheed told the Ambassador that small, fundamentalist communities on remote islands sent him complaints that music and dance programs on state television were "un-Islamic." Some people refused to pray at government mosques funded by money gained from alcohol sales at resorts. Nasheed added that some even rejected the Islamic orthodox Adalath party, since as a registered political party, it received government money earned through resort rents. Indian High Commissioner Avanindra Pandey told Ambassador that Maldivians follow the Salafi sect of Sunni Islam and have historically been moderate in their views. He said he'd heard reports of pockets of fundamentalism in poor communities, though he was unsure how widespread the problem of radicalism was.

PROMOTING U.S. ECONOMIC INTERESTS

¶8. (U) The Ambassador met with Abdul Haris, a representative of the national air carrier Island Aviation Services (IAS) who is considering purchasing new aircraft. Haris said that IAS, currently the domestic airline and ground handling and cargo agent for Male' airport, is planning to begin flying international routes to Trivandrum, Colombo, and Dhaka. The Ambassador urged Haris to buy Boeing planes, noting Boeing is opening a large service center in India that IAS can utilize. Haris replied that his choice was down to Boeing and Airbus,

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and he would seriously weigh the merits of both, with cost likely the deciding factor. He also mentioned the need for training in aviation-related fields, and the Ambassador encouraged Haris to contact the Federal Aviation Agency to learn more about its capacity-building programs.

¶9. (SBU) The Ambassador also met with Ahmed Abdullah, the Minister of Energy, Environment, and Water, who was gravely concerned about the effects of climate change on Maldives. The Ambassador noted that Maldives had the opportunity to set an example in the field of clean, renewable energy, adding that he had seen solar panels in some areas already. The Ambassador asked Abdullah to consider a joint venture with SouthWest Windpower, an American firm willing to do an assessment of Maldives. Abdullah agreed that it would be beneficial and said he would follow up on the project. He also said his ministry had a strong need for trained staff and sought educational opportunities for Maldivians in the U.S., which the Ambassador promised to promote.

COMMENT

¶10. (C) The Attorney General and Foreign Minister seemed deeply concerned about the stagnant state of the reform process, though they seemed to view the President as a champion of their cause. While it was encouraging that the opposition leader sought British assistance to re-engage with reformists in government, democratization in Maldives is not proceeding as fast as it should. It is worrying to hear from across the political spectrum that Wahab'ism may be taking root in a society that until now has been broadly moderate and tolerant. It is vital that Maldivians have a strong, viable alternative to religious extremism. Embassy is in the process of drafting a strategy to help boost the reform process and counter some of the negative influences such as growing Islamic extremism and drug abuse, that would disrupt economic and social progress, further set back democratization, and threaten the pro-Western tilt of the government. President Gayoom, after a twenty-eight year reign, will be key to driving the pace of reform as long as

he maintains the political will to do so. Since the reformist ministers mentioned some hard-liners have the President's ear and are impeding reforms, the Embassy and Washington should communicate directly with Gayoom and reiterate our support for the progressive ministers' agenda.
BLAKE